THE COLLECTOR'S MAGAZINE

DOLLS

August 1995

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Plug Into Her Electric Energy

Show Report:
1st Santa Fe Doll Festival

Tootsie Carmichael
with her Sibling Soul

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DOLLS

VOLUME 14, NUMBER 6 • AUGUST 1995

ON THE COVER is *Little Souls' Tootsie Carmichael and her Sibling Soul. Mellicent,* ABOVE, *was created exclusively for* Dolls *by Little Souls, Inc. See page 91 for more about these cloth dolls. (Photos by Lynton Gardiner)*

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Pas de Deux

A CREATIVE RUSSIAN COUPLE FINDS A NEW MEDIUM FOR THEIR ARTISTIC TALENTS IN THIS COUNTRY

by Lynton Gardiner ❦ Photos by Alexander Royzman

Editor's Note: Sharp-eyed readers will note the unusual byline above. Lynton Gardiner regularly contributes photography to this magazine, but here he is the author and his subject is the photographer. In 1993, Gardiner photographed one of the Royzmans' dolls for a forthcoming book. When he and Alexander Royzman met, they struck up a friendship, forged by their common vocation (Royzman is also a photographer as well as a cinematographer) and mutual admiration. Gardiner momentarily discarded his photographer's hat to put the Royzmans' tale into words.

When Alexander and Marina Royzman arrived in America from the former Soviet Union in 1990, they carried everything they owned in two small suitcases—"and they were filled with baby clothes!" quips Marina. But, like many creative people before them who left their homes and families in the Old World for the promise of a better life, the Royzmans also brought with them years of artistic experience and their shared dream of success in the United States.

In Russia, the Royzmans had each achieved a high measure of artistic and professional acclaim. Alexander was a cinematographer who had photographed more than 25 feature films shown throughout the Soviet Union. His final film before leaving his homeland was a 1988 Russian production of Agatha Christie's mystery, *Ten Little Indians*. Marina was a successful graphic designer and book illustrator. After meeting in 1987, Marina and Alexander soon began their first collaboration, an illustrated book about the life of Leo Tolstoy. Happily, the collaboration was successful. Alexander and Marina married, and began to plan for a new life in America.

Although Marina did not make her first doll until after her and Alexander's arrival in this country,

One of the most difficult portraits to execute in fabric was their 1991 rendition of Josephine Baker, say the Royzmans. Since the 16-inch figure is unclothed, any mistake would be visible.

The Royzmans' first doll, made in 1990, was a 16-inch cloth portrait of the 19th-century ballerina, Amalia Ferrari.

In 1983, in Russia, Alexander Royzman took this evocative photograph, which he named The Life of the Doll, after a musical composition by Tchaikovsky. The first of a series of four, this photograph represents for the Royzmans the theme of the doll's life as a metaphor for human life. The Royzmans added to their series of dancers' portraits with Anna Pavlova, right, in 1994. The fabric figure stands 20 inches high.

The Royzmans made this portrait in fabric of the Russian dancer Vaslav Nijinsky in 1993. He is 20 inches high.

the idea had been close to her heart for a long time. "It was always my childhood dream to be a dollmaker," says Marina, "but in Russia this was not considered a serious profession. I went to the famous Art Institute of Lvov in [what is now] Ukraine to study graphic design and book illustration." Marina was happy and successful in her work, but she never forgot her dream of dollmaking.

Alexander, on the other hand, did have some experience in dollmaking while still in Russia. "Actually, what I made first wasn't quite a doll, but a puppet for one of my movies in 1976," he explains. "In Russia, the puppet and doll theater is a great tradition. Puppets have always been allowed to say and do things, even during times when people were not free to speak their minds." This first puppet, a pagan holiday figure representing the spring sun, from Ukrainian folklore, captured a new part of Alexander's imagination. Recognizing a great potential for personal artistic expression, Alexander went on to make ten more pieces of wood and papier-mâché, basing these, too, on the rich Ukrainian folkloric traditions. Those first dolls are now treasured by private collectors in Moscow, Kiev and Odessa.

In 1990, the Royzmans, now a family with a new baby, arrived in New York and settled in Manhattan's Washington Heights. When Alexander exhibited his pictures and sculptures at the Yeshiva University Art Museum in Manhattan, he met a collector who, inspired by one of Alexander's porcelain figures, commissioned the artist to create what he described as "a sculptural figure with clothes." The collector was especially interested in dancers of bygone times, and so the Royzmans began their first doll collaboration: a series of doll portraits of famous dancers. A fabric portrait of the noted 19th-century ballerina, Amalia Ferrari, was born. Other portraits, most of them in fabric, too,

soon followed, including Josephine Baker; Maria Taglioni; Anna Pavlova; Katherine Dunham and Vaslav Nijinsky. News of the Royzmans' talents quietly spread and, at the time of this writing, about 25 commissioned dolls have been created, each one-of-a-kind. "The dancers of the past are very important subjects for us," explains Alexander, "because they express our feelings about artists in the Russian culture and about ourselves as a part of this culture."

When asked about the source of their inspiration, Alexander says: "Sometimes, over a cup of tea, a new doll idea comes to us that we've never spoken of before." Asked about technique, Alexander and Marina glance at each other with amusement. "When we came to America, we had almost nothing, so we used what we could. We make our dolls from cloth, and form them by hand, using no molds," Alexander explains." Silk is our preferred fabric, and we fill the bodies with cotton wool. After that, we finish the dolls with paint and sew all their clothes by hand." The most difficult doll they have created was the portrait of Josephine Baker; because it wears no clothes, even the smallest mistake would ruin the entire piece. The couple agrees that the body construction was very difficult to achieve. "Sculpting the proportions of the human body using only needles, fabric and cotton was a real challenge," Alexander says.

The Royzmans rendered the 19th-century dancer Maria Taglioni both in fabric, 30 inches, left, and in porcelain, 36 inches, in 1994.

The husband-and-wife team share the creative work differently on each piece. While Alexander laughingly claims that "my wife does most things better than I do," he admits that they have no pre-established process; they pass each piece back and forth. The couple has also started working in other media. They recently installed a kiln, and are now making one-of-a-kind porcelain pieces, while their most recent doll is a humorous 34-inch portrait of Mikhail Baryshnikov as the Prince from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, with head, hands and feet sculpted from Fimo and joined to a cloth body. The Royzmans find that some of the other media, porcelain in particular, have great potential for a more defined image. However, they plan to continue working in a variety of materials.

Among the Royzmans' most recent pieces is Mikhail Baryshnikov as the Prince in *Swan Lake*. His head and limbs are sculpted from Fimo, his body is cloth and he holds a handcarved, painted wooden swan.

Alexander sees a strong link between his artistic endeavors, embodied in a series of four black-and-white photographs he took eleven years ago. He named the photos after four musical compositions of Tchaikovsky: "The Life of the Doll," "The Illness of the Doll," "The Death of the Doll" and "The Birth of the New Doll," because he believes the composer's "genius expressed his thoughts and feelings through the theme of the doll's life, which was a metaphor for human life." Alexander believes that "the doll's image also represents everything related to the arts. The doll relates to sculpture and paintings, to music and literature, to theatre and history, and moreover, the doll is that psychological component of our life which responds to our most intimate feelings. Also, for my wife and myself, in the doll is concentrated our own past and our long artistic experience of many years of work in Russian cinematography, book illustration, photography and sculpture."

The future, for the Royzmans, is filled with the harmonious melding of the arts that defines their life together. "We continue creating the portrait dolls, and we will begin to make new dolls, which will be the continuation of the series of my black-and-white pictures," muses Alexander. "The image from one of these pictures, entitled The Birth of the New Doll, will become the doll itself, and the beginning of a new stage in our work, where we will try to connect our ideas in sculpture, photography and painting." ■